

February 10, 2026

## **To Instructors of *USC Astronautics***

I want to update you on the forthcoming changes in the *Master of Science in Astronautical Engineering* (MS ASTE) program in the Viterbi School of Engineering (VSOE) at USC.

I have made a decision to step down – after 30+ years – from directing the program, effective June 30, 2026. Unless the arrangements change, my *USC Astronautics* colleague Prof. Joe Wang will take over the leadership role. Together with the department chairman, Prof. Dan Erwin, he will manage the program.

I will continue supporting the program in an advisory capacity for as long as needed and desired. This will assure its smooth operations next year and, I hope, future growth.

The transition is natural and amicable and in no way caused by any conflict. I will be with the School for a few more years, with my responsibilities, commitments, and interests shifting to other scholarly pursuits (space science, technology, policy, etc.). Service is not excluded.

As I conclude my role, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to all *USC Astronautics* instructors. Thank you for your trust, hard work, dedication, and loyalty. It was the privilege and honor to work with you on preserving and expanding space engineering education and supporting the space enterprise in the United States and worldwide.

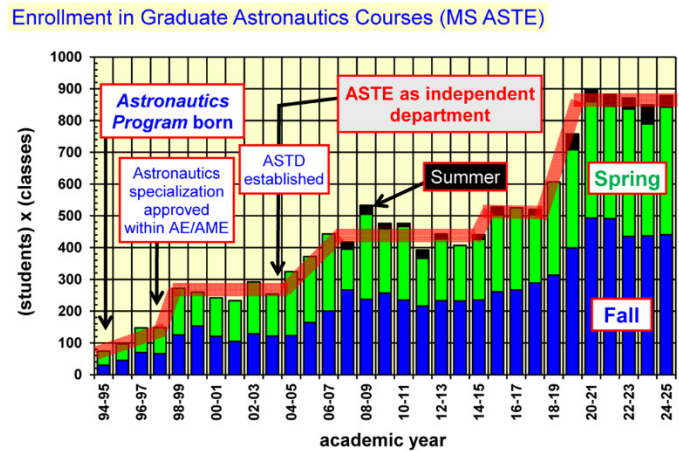
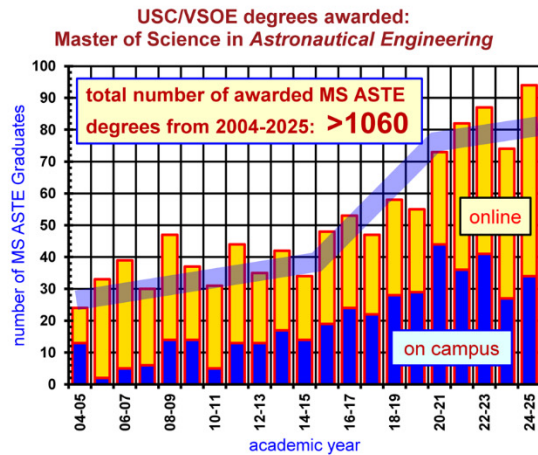
I want to repeat here my words at the recent celebration (<http://astronauticsnow.com/2025aste20/>) of Astronautical Engineering at USC: *our extraordinary instructors from the space industry and government centers are true pride and strength of the program*. Thank you all.

Together, we have built a unique *Astronautics* program focused on space engineering, unlike traditional aerospace departments at universities in the United States, combining aeronautics and astronautics. In spite of numerous challenges and headwinds, the USC MS ASTE program grew remarkably and became highly visible. It is among the largest in the United States and internationally (see several peer-reviewed publications at <http://astronauticsnow.com/aste.pdf>).

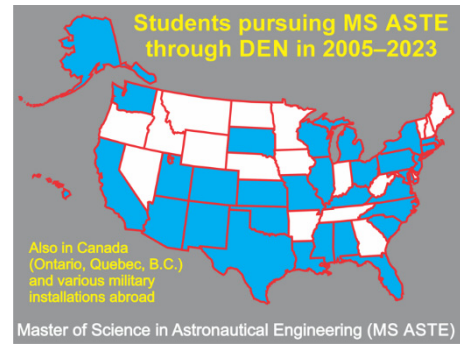
Many of you know that I began building the space engineering program at USC in the middle of the 1990s, after becoming an aerospace engineering faculty in 1993. (I was “washed ashore” in California and joined USC in March 1990 after a “tunneling effect transition” from the other side of the globe; details at <http://astronauticsnow.com/tunneling/>.)

After the initial successes of *USC Astronautics*, then Dean of Engineering Prof. Max Nikias made a fateful decision to form a new independent space-focused academic unit in 2004. I was honored to serve as its founding chairman from 2004-2007. Today, it is the Department of Astronautical Engineering. I chaired the department again from 2016 to 2019. I have been directing the master’s component of *USC Astronautics* throughout the last 30+ years without interruption. More than 2600 graduate students enrolled in the course on fundamentals of space systems that I taught during that time. My other class on rocket and spacecraft propulsion attracted more than 1200 students.





The American Society for Engineering Education tracks the number of awarded master's degrees in aeronautical, astronautical, and aerospace engineering. Recent statistics (2019-2023) suggest that USC/VSOE's MS ASTE accounted for 4-5% in this broad combined category. The space component represents a smaller part of aerospace. Therefore, our MS ASTE program has likely contributed 10-20% of the space-engineering-focused master's degrees earned nationally. This is a consequential contribution to the national security and technological prowess of the United States.



We awarded nearly 1100 Master of Science degrees in Astronautical Engineering (figure top left) since the establishment of the independent ASTE department in 2004 (and many more, counting the earlier space engineering specialization). During the last several years (figure top right), MS ASTE classes have been attracting nearly 900 students in 3-unit classes, or nearly \$7M in tuition, annually. The program reaches students everywhere in the United States and beyond through the Distance Education Network, DEN@Viterbi (figure above right).

To summarize, USC/VSOE's space engineering program is in excellent shape. Thank you again.

Ad astra,

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Director, Master of Science in Astronautical Engineering  
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cc: (selected) Deans of VSOE, (selected) program supporters and colleagues

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